

Decision Memo

Prescribed Burning near Lake Chatuge

USDA Forest Service Southern Region

Chattahoochee National Forest

Blue Ridge Ranger District

Towns County, Georgia

DECISION, and Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

In our continuing efforts to protect neighboring communities and natural resources, I have decided to implement the Lake Chatuge prescribed burn consisting of 220 acres of the Blue Ridge Ranger District (see attached map). Implementing this project will:

- *contribute* to the conservation and recovery of federally-listed threatened and endangered species, in this case the Green pitcher plant, through habitat maintenance. Chattahoochee-Oconee LMRP-Goal 15-T&E and Sensitive/Locally Rare Species-page 2-12.
- *maintain* existing oak and oak-pine forests, by reducing stem density in these forest types. This burn will generally top-kill trees up to three inches in diameter at the root collar, thereby reducing stems across the area. Chattahoochee-Oconee LRMP-Goal 3-Terrestrial Plants and Animals and Their Associated Habitats-page 2-6.
- And *reduce* the likelihood of a wildfire moving from National Forest System lands onto private lands or from private lands onto National Forest System lands. Chattahoochee-Oconee Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP)-Goal 58- Fire Management-page 2-53.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

This action does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and therefore, are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The specific category, identified in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 “Environmental Policy and Procedures” is Section 31.2 Category 6: Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities (see attached map).

FINDING OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES:

In 2003 as part of a larger proposed project the district interdisciplinary team screened these actions for the presence of any one of the extraordinary circumstances identified in Interim Directive No. 1909.15-2002-2 to Forest Service Handbook 1909.15. Section 30.3 paragraph 2 lists the following resource conditions that were considered:

- Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species; The green pitcher plant, although present, is not considered important in the overall context of this decision because the action, properly implemented, will benefit the habitat of this species.

- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds; the head waters of Lake Chatuge provide the City of Hiawassee with its public water (located east of US Highway 76). The project site is located west of this source. This project should have little or no effect on water quality.
- Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas;
- Inventoried roadless areas;
- Research natural areas;
- American Indians and Native religious or cultural sites;
- Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

We found that no extraordinary circumstances exist that might cause the action to have significant effects.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public scoping began in December 2003. The purpose of scoping was to determine the issues and concerns related to the proposal. Fourteen scoping responses were received on the original letter which invited comments on a prescribed fire project of approximately 8,218 acres to be done over a five year period. The Lake Chatuge area was a part of this scoping. There were no comments received concerning the Lake Chatuge area. A legal notice requesting comments for this project was placed in local papers of record on October 3rd, 2007. The time period was for 30 days. There were no comments received.

In a decision memo signed in September 2004 nine areas were identified for project implementation. The Lake Chatuge site was left out of that decision memo as the district was waiting for a response from the US Fish and Wildlife Service in regards to the green pitcher plant. The US Fish and Wildlife Service responded in March 2004 indicating that they supported the project.

The comments received were used to refine the project and analysis. They were also used to explore the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and potential effects to those resources. These comments are located in the project file.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

Forest Plan Consistency – The actions in this decision are consistent with the Chattahoochee- Oconee National Forests LMRP of 2004.

Endangered Species – Implementing the actions in this decision will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or result in loss of any other species' viability, or create significant trends towards Federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act (see project file for the USFWS response to the Green Pitcher plant located within the area). The prescribed burn will enhance conditions for the green pitcher plant by controlling competing vegetation. The location of the Green Pitcher plant will be identified by flagging during the project in order to keep mechanical equipment out of the area.

Cultural Resources – The actions in this decision will not adversely affect any sites listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic resources.

State-approved Best Management Practices (BMP's) will be met and this project will comply with the Clean Water Act.

The project follows the Forest-wide and Management Prescription (MP) standards as mentioned above. Specifically:

- The prescribed burn is consistent with the desired conditions for the specific MP's within the project area, and will help meet specific goals and objectives established for MP 7.E.1., and MRx 11. This involved an analysis of effects in relation to those expected by the Forest plan. Refer to page 1 where the purpose and need for the project was examined in relation to the effects from the project.
- This prescribed burning project was chosen after considering economic and environmental aspects of various renewable resources and protection of forest resources to provide for outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish. These resource values are discussed throughout the DM.
- The project will provide for diversity for plant and animal communities based on the suitability and capability of the land area in overall multiple use objectives. See the purpose and need for the project on page 1.
- This project will not produce substantial and permanent impairment of site productivity and will ensure conservation of soil and water resources.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

The Lake Chatuge prescribed burn is scheduled to be conducted in 2008. It is to be on a burn rotation of three to five years.

APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to appeal, pursuant to USFS regulations 36 CFR 215.11 and 215.12. No comments were received during the 30 day legal notice comment period. Implementation can begin immediately.

CONTACT PERSON

For further information concerning this decision contact district Fire Management Officer, Mike Davis, by phone at (706) 745-6928 extension 105, by letter at P.O. Box 9, Blairsville, GA, 30514, or by e-mail at madavis@fs.fed.us.

SIGNATURE AND DATE

/s/Alan Polk
Alan Polk
District Ranger
Blue Ridge Ranger District

January 22, 2008
Date

DRAFT